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Amplifying Development: Partnering with Faith

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Key messages

- Faith actors should be actively engaged as potential catalysts for sustained, positive, social change within communities, not just one-off points of entry into the wider community.
- Engagement with local faith leaders should recognise that this includes non-ordained leaders, such as those who lead youth and women's ministries, and informal faith leaders, for example those involved in house groups and outreaches.
- Engagement with local faith actors should be situated within a wider community-based approach, avoiding an exclusive focus on faith.
- Effective partnerships 'seek to harness and amplify faith's positive potential' around spiritual capital.ⁱ This requires developing trust and respect between multiple stakeholders that can move beyond one-off transactional, to longer-term transformational, relationships.
- The faith sector is diverse and plural and should not be homogenised or made static. Multi-level partnerships and the developing of networks can engage inter- and intra-faith dynamics.

Introduction

In 2017, the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities conducted a study funded by the UK Department for International Development, entitled "Working effectively with faith leaders to challenge harmful traditional practices". This policy brief focuses on lessons learned around engaging with faith more broadly.

Key Findings

Faith offers people a coherent system of values and meaning, influencing or shaping how most people relate to and understand the world, often underpinning and shaping individual and social beliefs, attitudes and ethical norms. While the role of religious institutions has increasingly been recognised in development,ⁱⁱ this study highlighted the complex plurality of the faith sector and its potential for amplifying development objectives.

Improved recognition of this plurality can help avoid an over-simplification of faith actors as one-dimensional, instrumental 'gatekeepers'. Instead, transformational partnerships can be nurtured at many levels, recognising faith approaches as resources for authentic collaboration.

*We should come out of our shells, meaning every [religious group] should go to the other in order to be able to come up with something which serves our country; something which evolves our society.*ⁱⁱⁱ

How the study was done

A literature review, online survey, and five case studies were conducted^{iv} each study focusing on an organisation's work on harmful traditional practices (HTPs) and engagements with faith leaders. The literature review focused on a) HTP prevalence data; and b) HTPs within the context of faith and faith actors. The five case studies focused on Tearfund, Islamic Relief Worldwide, World Vision International, ABAAD, and Christian Aid, with an in-depth look at their work on four HTPs: female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), child and early marriage, honour-related violence, and son preference. The case studies used a combination of document review and in-depth interviews. A short online survey was also completed by 65 professionals to complement and broaden the information gathered through the case studies.

The partnership between World Vision International and Islamic Relief Worldwide around the Channels of Hope (CoH) methodology illustrates the importance of partnering with and within faith around theological engagement on developmental issues. Here Islamic Relief is taking responsibility for developing the Islamic version of CoH (a World Vision methodology targeting faith leaders and used to address a range of development issues), which will be used in Muslim communities. As Islamic Relief, and not

World Vision, are the experts on Islamic faith and its sacred scriptures, both organisations saw this as necessary. This faith-to-faith partnership is based on recognition of the importance of adapting interventions to a

particular context, and of direct theological engagement being done by those with the authority and knowledge to do so.

Findings

1. Engaging with multiple levels of partnership

The study showed that three levels of partnering with faith is common within the development sector:

- Policy or funding partnerships between the development sector (donors/policy makers) and the faith sector (faith actors/faith-based organisations). This often relates to faith actors as recipients of funds.
- Global or local partnerships among faith actors/faith leaders themselves, including both inter-denominational and, at times, interfaith relationships.
- Local partnerships between faith communities and other key community actors and systems. These can situate faith contributions within a wider multi-sectoral referral system.

These different partnerships each come with their unique power dynamics. It is important to take note of this complex plurality, to prevent faith being homogenised or fixed. Paying attention to the diverse ways in which faith often manifests enables appropriate partnerships to be mapped and nurtured at each level, including between faith partners as the below example shows.

2. Why a dual approach to faith community engagement is vital

Case study participants noted that a two-pronged approach to faith communities was most effective where there is both engagement with senior religious leaders who have wider authority over others, but also direct engagement with a range of formal and informal faith leaders at community level, which allows multiple faith actor voices to engage and be heard. Partnering from the top-down is needed, but alone it runs the risk of solely amplifying a monolithic faith voice of traditional authority. Additional grassroots methodologies, such as small group toolkits for women and youth groups, and contextual bible studies, can engage faith communities at multiple levels.

This multi-level approach is also complemented by multi-lateral engagement within the faith sector, through the increasing development of local, national, regional and even global networks of faith actors. These partnerships work thematically, often with faith leaders, to develop inter- and intra-faith engagement around specific practical shared concerns (e.g. gender-based violence). Case study participants noted their effectiveness at building peer momentum at a higher level, to create supportive partnerships within and across multiple faith communities within local settings. This network approach adds value to, rather than replaces, existing partnerships with particular groups

A community-based approach holistically connects faith into broader networks which include other stakeholders such as teachers, police, health providers, law and policy makers. This enables faith actors to contribute, but also to listen and learn from different voices about other dimensions of development issues on an ongoing basis.

At times, faith itself may be complicit within community conflicts and even lack credibility as a result. A multi-sectoral approach enables this concern to be identified and potentially addressed. To this end, faith institutions can be utilised as referral points to other services available locally, and can invite experts from other sectors to speak to their members, to build capacity and awareness, thus developing cross-sector relationships which are more interdependent and porous.

4. Moving from transactional to transformational partnerships

There are these two ways of thinking about partnerships...the transactional partnership where we just work together on something, and... transformational partnership. This is the more powerful one and especially with faith partners is the one we try to be aiming at where you both really know each other as partners rather than just picking a problem and just joining forces (Cheryl, violence and peace advisor, based in Ireland, June 29, 2017).^v

A transactional approach to faith partners runs the risk of seeing them only as institutional gatekeepers who contribute social capital resources (e.g. access to communities, volunteers and buildings). While these are important, findings suggest this can instrumentalise faith and fail to recognise its unique transformational role in nurturing spiritual capital. Transformational partnerships instead require long-term engagement, allowing trust and respect to develop between all parties through a gradual process of aligning values and then recognising shared practical goals. They take seriously faith's potential for catalysing change through engaging with social norms as underlying drivers of institutional, community, household and individual behaviour.

To develop these partnerships at all levels, improved acknowledgement of the importance of religion for many people is required by secular-oriented actors. This involves paying attention to the theological languages valued by, and authoritative to, the faith partners concerned. Engaging faith actors theologically, and with reference to sacred texts, worship practices and models of community service,

draws on a faith framework they are vested in, motivated by, and comfortable with. It enables existing faith platforms such as pulpits, madrassas, educational institutions or small groups to offer space to amplify development concerns, as intrinsically connected to faith frameworks.

While secular-orientated organisations can, and should, partner with faith actors on many levels, it is often those who are invested in faith beliefs and practice, such as faith based organisations, who may have the experience and credibility to give faith-based work theological depth, scale and sustainability within a particular faith tradition. Study findings show they can utilise basic faith principles as a shared reference point for transformational partnerships, amplifying compliance, influence and motivation as well as credibly debunking myths around religious legitimisation of harmful social norms.

Conclusion

Faith actors hold underutilised potential for catalysing lasting change in many settings. A focus on the high-level partnership between the faith sector and the development sector can overshadow other partnerships within the faith sector itself, and in its many local, multi-sectoral collaborations. Building collaborative faith networks, engaging with other stakeholders and participating in referral systems all reinforce faith as an integral part of all community approaches. However this should not collapse faith into the wider development sector but pay attention to its unique role within it. This requires increased understanding by other partners of the spiritual capital often available within different frameworks of faith, and the languages and habits they can inculcate into how people relate to one another.

Recommendations

- Engaging faith actors requires an awareness of the complex plurality within faith itself and the multiple levels of partnership involving faith actors. This requires deeper engagement with faith actors as participants and not as tools. A mutual commitment is required from all partners to learn from, and take seriously, each other's motivations, ethos, frameworks and discourses.
- Paying close attention to the power dynamics operating in global and local contexts, both within faith and in its interactions with other stakeholders, enables multi-level approaches to faith actors at different hierarchical levels, remaining fluid, plural and tailored to new needs.
- Partners should shift their approach away from the transactional use of faith, to building transformational models that amplify development in more authentic ways. This requires long-term trust, engagement with religious ideas and respect for the role of faith in people's lives. Engagement with Faith Based Organisations should be mainstreamed into funding to build on their unique capacity to influence local community practices.

The literature review, survey report, five case study reports, and synthesis report can all be found at <http://gender-based-violence.jliflc.com/htp-study>

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- The literature review, survey report, five case study reports, and synthesis report can all be found at <https://jliflc.com/>
- Pseudonyms are used when referring to research participants.

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